

Given that our state and nation are engulfed in access to justice issues, I cannot think of a worse time for a budget proposal eliminating funding for the Legal Services Corporation (LSC). The work of the LSC is fundamental to our society. Its defunding would be devastating to low-income Ohioans seeking help with their civil legal problems. The effects of such an imprudent policy decision would reverberate throughout our justice system and ensure disparate treatment of our citizens.

Nearly 2.3 million, or 20 percent, of our fellow Ohioans qualify economically for legal aid services. In 2015, LSC provided \$12.4 million of the \$39.9 million Ohio statewide legal aid budget, or 31.1 percent. In other words, defunding LSC would result in an immediate and irreparable termination of many of the services economically challenged Ohioans have come to rely upon.

Ohio has two statewide non-profit legal aids and six regional partners, covering all 88 counties, each of which depend upon LSC funding. These organizations point out regularly that even with current funding they cannot serve everyone who needs their assistance. In many circumstances they have had to limit their services in such areas as family law, domestic violence, employment and social service referrals. The people who work for these organizations are consummate professionals who have dedicated their careers to providing service to their fellow citizens with little more than the satisfaction that they are helping others.

Especially vulnerable to the impact of eliminating LSC funding would be Ohioans who live in rural areas that often do not have access to other aid sources, such as pro bono help. These counties simply do not have the lawyer population to close the gap with pro bono assistance.

Similarly impacted will be the elderly, who comprise a growing sector of the population in need of legal aid services, and veterans who have their own unique needs. Each of these groups and many others would suffer greatly should the already-stretched resources of Ohio legal aid groups shrink or collapse due to elimination of LSC funding.

Providing access to a fair and impartial justice system is a fundamental obligation of government and a fundamental right of all. The defunding of the LSC would deprive the very people most in need of help in gaining access to our justice system. Equally important, it sends a very dangerous message to the rest of society: That the rule of law is really not all that important, and that you can only get access to the system if you can afford it. Many Ohioans simply cannot.

As a public servant and a lawmaker, you know that we can ill afford to become a nation that says the rule of law is a fundamental value – but only if you can afford it.

I urge you to resist the defunding of LSC, not only in the interests of those people who rely upon it, but in the interests of the rest of us who rely upon a fair and accessible system of justice for all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maureen O'Connor". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and "O".

Maureen O'Connor
Chief Justice